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Design, Innovation and the 21st Century Fashion Blur.

Over the last 50 years, the role of the fashion professional has become increasingly complex and diverse. In the context of a chaotic high-speed industry, the image of the individual artistic designer with a unique practice that evolves over the breadth of a career has been seriously challenged. Contemporary fashion designers are called upon to apply skills beyond the sphere of design and branding to consider issues of marketability, technological advancement, globalization, sustainable business models and social responsibility - to name just a few. Bridgstock, Brough and Thomas (2012) highlight this complex skill-set suggesting that in addition to being practical, innovative and business-minded, fashion graduates must be “highly self-motivated and entrepreneurial... digital and network savvy, and ...committed to a continuous process of product and self-reinvention in order to stay in the game.” Identified as the ‘slash/slash’ generation (Viewpoint 2008) emerging designers engage in diverse career paths that see them working across several cultural and aesthetic fields simultaneously, creating their own “career portfolios” (McMahon 2011). Successful fashion graduates seem to negotiate the diversity and complexity of the fashion system not only by remaining flexible and responsive, but also by embracing the possibilities that emerge as more traditional systems of production and consumption are replaced by new, often digitally based practices.

The question of what role fashion education plays in this vast, globalized, chaotic, creative economy known as contemporary fashion is understandably contentious. With claims to both art and industry, fashion education has often been split along ideological lines. Writing in 1998 British cultural theorist, Angela McRobbie identified at least three types of fashion education: *managerial fashion*, with a focus on industry relevance and clothing for 'real' people, *professional fashion*, fostering creative design supported by technical skills, and *ideas* or *conceptual fashion*, emphasizing innovation and individual creative practice over industry standards. However, McRobbie's typology is perhaps best understood mapped against a long-standing tension in fashion education between providing students with technical industry skills and developing creative 'conceptual' fashion practitioners. The problem with this dichotomy is that it assumes and maintains a divide where creativity and innovation are the sole domain of conceptually based design and the manufacturing industry is relegated as separate often 'backward' entity. Moreover, in the contemporary global context, particularly in light of pressing environmental and social issues that have come to define the tenor of our times, designers are frequently being called upon to innovate at the level of industry and management, as much as at the level of design. As a result, fashion programs need to move beyond tensions between art and industry and approaches that pitch ideas against manufacture, and instead focus on exploring how innovation can occur across all aspects of fashion design, production, marketing, business and consumption.

Fashion and the Creative Industries

Inspired by the challenge of developing a course that equipped graduates for the 21st century, QUT's Fashion program was founded in 2003 in the context of the world's first 'Creative Industries Faculty': an initiative specifically designed to bring together the disciplines of "performing and creative arts, media and communication, and design...to train graduates in the creative aspects of the new knowledge economy" (Hartley, 2007:1). Aside from the energy and excitement that an entirely new faculty can bring to education, Suzi Vaughan, QUT Fashion's first head of school, was equally inspired by the positives of the university's geographical location arguing "within an age of increasing mass globalization, information overload, and mass-consumption, ... it is at the periphery that new ideas and new ways of thinking will blossom" (Vaughan & Armstrong, 2009: 11). To her mind the fact that Brisbane was not a fashion capital – not even in a local sense, afforded a spirited freedom that not all fashion education was allowed.

Therefore from the outset QUT adopted a unique attitude to fashion education by maintaining an intensive studio-based approach to conceptual fashion design practice, as found in the British art school system, while also making the most of the interdisciplinary focus of the creative industries by encouraging students to pursue complementary creative areas such as journalism, visual arts and film. At the same time QUT Fashion made a concerted effort to redress what Tiziana Ferrero-Regis (2009: 81) highlights as the "separation of practice and theory" that tends to characterise the

fashion system. This meant developing an undergraduate course that relies on three interlocking strands: practice, theory and industry and building a number of practice-based units that facilitate students to bring all these facets together. In a further effort to broach a curious divide in fashion education, QUT Fashion joined forces with the QUT Business School in 2007 to offer Australia's only double degree in business and fashion design. This move encouraged a version of applied creativity that moved beyond the traditional bounds of many design courses and equipped students to engage with the often- harsh reality of the fashion world.

In the context of this interdisciplinary approach QUT subsequently developed a range of real world learning projects such as *The Fleet Store* (a student run pop-up store) and student-led fashion magazine, *Frock Paper Scissors*, in order to develop student entrepreneurship beyond the design studio and into practices across the broader creative industries (McMahon 2011). In a similar vein, but with more of a community focus, *the stitchery collective* evolved as QUT graduate collaborative design team that explores the potential for fashion to be applied in contexts far beyond that of the boutique and the catwalk. Projects such as *fashioning social inclusion* (2011-2012) and *see it, love it, make it* (2012) see students and graduates working with diverse community groups to extend fashion's influence to generate social change and activate cultural development. In all of these projects students are called upon to raise funds, apply for grants, pitch ideas, sign contracts, promote and market their creative outputs,

forge industry and community contacts and generally wrangle a place for themselves in what already seems to be a saturated fashion world.

Therefore, if understanding fashion as part of a bigger picture is a keystone to QUT's approach to design education in the 21st century, the other is the emphasis on research and reflective practice. This aspect of design education is significant not only so that designers can develop practices that are individually sustaining and rewarding, but it is also vital given the range of environmental and social ills that the fashion industry perpetuates. Of course, maintaining relevance in the industry requires that graduates are equipped to operate within the existing framework; however, it is also imperative to educate them to stop, question, research and take the time to build new creative solutions and an evolving philosophy of practice. Below we highlight the work of four QUT Fashion graduates, Shenaz Engineer, Ana Diaz, Carla Binotto and Carla van Lunn who are definitely applying their entrepreneurial instinct and design integrity to carve out a place for themselves in the industry.

Shenaz Engineer:

Shenaz Engineer is a fashion practitioner successfully and innovatively using her theoretical and practical skills to bridge business, conceptual design and marketing. Engineer was in the first graduating cohort of Australia's first double degree in fashion and business. Far from dampening her creative potential in fashion projects, the dual-degree graduate was able to synthesize her skills from business with fashion theory, industry and studio knowledge to develop her conceptually driven, graduate collection:

A Kaleidoscopic Perspective, a spectacular achievement revolving around architectural draping, innovative finishing and fabrication, and engineered digital print design. At the same time, Engineer used *The Fleet Store* project to develop a commercially viable diffusion range to market and sell. The diffusion range was a market-ready echo of her conceptually driven graduation collection which not only sold out in Brisbane but also in the London boutique, *Milk*.

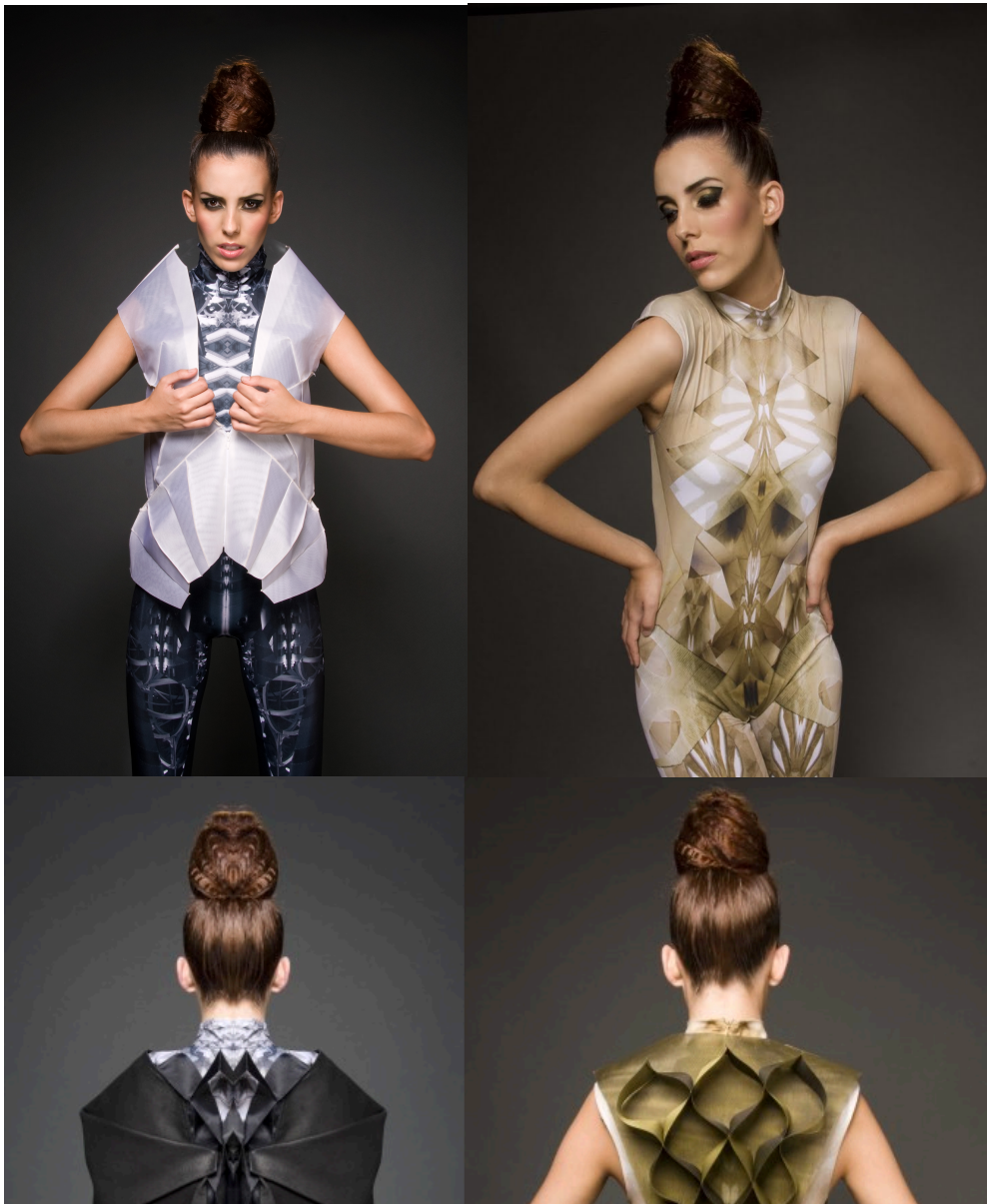
Like many of her fellow students, Engineer developed her individual architectural design philosophy not only through her theory and studio subjects at QUT, but also through a semester abroad on exchange to Amsterdam and an industry placement with Alexander McQueen as part of her study. The well researched design methodology and conceptual ideas underpinning Engineer's work was acknowledged by both academia and industry through awards and showcases. *A Kaleidoscopic Perspective* was awarded first place in the Australasian Student Design Awards and second place in the Dunedin iD International Emerging Designer Awards. Subsequently Engineer was offered an exhibition space to show at Berlin Fashion Week, and in a pop culture coup her garments were borrowed by internationally recognized musician, Fergie, from the Black Eyed Peas. The fact that Engineer's work has been celebrated globally by all corners of the fashion world, both academic and commercially driven, demonstrates that true innovation bridges all divides.

Shenaz's graduation collection on the catwalk:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qPyTM6mgxE>

A Kaleidoscopic Perspective- video projection for Berlin Fashion Week presentation of
Shenaz's collection of the same name:

<http://vimeo.com/28440949>



Ana Diaz:

Ana Diaz's practice demonstrates a successful foray into Australian fashion micro-business effectively juggling creative and commercial needs while also engaging her audience with a distinct and continuously evolving design signature. After being nominated for the Sportsgirl L'Oreal Melbourne Fashion Festival Showcase in 2011, Diaz was one of two designers selected to undertake a design collaboration with the iconic Australian brand. Due to her well established personal design philosophy and deep self-understanding, Diaz was able to effectively translate her design handwriting to a range for the Sportsgirl customer while still encapsulating her playful brand identity. The experience of working with the Sportsgirl team within their supply chain was a thoroughly enriching experience and the exposure meant the logical next step was to launch her own label, *Diaz*.

Enterprise learning projects, such as *The Fleet Store*, gave Diaz an introduction to running a creative business; however, to successfully launch and sustain a fashion brand, she sought business and design mentoring at the QUT Creative Enterprise

Australia Fashion Incubator. Diaz is successfully stocked in numerous design-driven boutiques in Australia, such as *Violent Green* and *Alice Euphemia* and has recently started to gain a celebrity following in Australia. With supply chains, traditional seasons and delivery schedules speeding up and changing globally (McMahon 2012), Diaz knew she needed to be flexible and forward thinking to develop an international sales strategy. As a result, with the support of the Fashion Incubator Ana has been devising a transeasonal ranging strategy with small-run local production to meet the emerging needs of a shifting market.

Diaz is an example of a fashion practitioner working at the forefront of creative business and design by pushing for innovative strategies across the spectrum of her business and industry collaborations. Poised to sell her third successful range, she never rests 'comfortably', instead continuing to push her practice forward. Diaz will soon begin work as one of four designers on a Fashion Incubator project funded through Arts Queensland to collaborate with Indigenous Australian artists and expand her creative practice. This young designer's approach to fashion demonstrates that a drive for innovation means that commercial success does not come at the expense of creativity or community engagement.

Ana's graduation collection on the catwalk:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXSkkqtkAc>

Website for Ana's label *Diaz*:
<http://diazlabel.com/>



Carla Binotto and Carla Van Lunn:

Carla Binotto and Carla Van Lunn are prime examples of reflective practitioners effectively evolving their practice to meet emerging challenges of the fashion industry. With the development of their 'cult' label, *Maison Briz Vegas*, Binotto and Van Lunn have further refined their already unique creative practices to respond to a need for more collaborative, socially responsible and environmentally sustainable fashion. Their graduation collections demonstrate strong design philosophies and a drive for innovation forged during their study at QUT. However, their current label demonstrates they have the tools of reflective practice required to translate their respective design handwriting into a distinctive and conceptually driven design solution that responds to the crisis of material shortages and waste.

The pair demonstrated a keen ability for conceptually driven clothing in their study, with Binotto presenting a stunning interpretation of 'the glove' through innovative pattern cutting and intensive creative research, and Van Lunn designing an iD International Emerging Designer Award- winning range that gave an abstract interpretation of a

picnic. Both designers displayed a considered approach to design and conceptual thinking and problem solving techniques. They also evolved additional dimensions to their practices, Van Lunn, through extensive experience in the Parisian luxury fashion industry, and Binotto, through her work in QUT affiliated fashion community engagement group, *the stitchery collective*. All these skills and experiences would serve them extremely well when tackling the pressing issue of bringing sustainable fashion to the luxury market.

Theorists may argue that fashion practices needs to “reduce the impact of modern consumption without compromising commercial or creative edge” (Chapman 2005, 24). However, this standpoint does not capitalise on the enhanced sense of identity people receive from the act of consuming a luxury product. Luxury products perform two symbolic functions, not only enhancing the consumer’s status in the eyes of others, but also enhancing their own identity by aligning them with the core values and ideal customer of the brand (Morley & McMahon 2011). “The consumer of the future does not just want to be seduced but also redeemed” (Giesen 2008: 75) and therefore brands need to weave the values of environmental sustainability and social awareness into their brand identity and design signature. Binotto and Van Lunn have been spectacularly successful at developing an innovative, luxury, design-driven brand identity and will continue to further refine the supply chain and manufacturing process through Binotto’s practice-led PhD at QUT. Binotto and Van Lunn are wonderful examples of designers who use innovation as a key driver to unite theory and practice.

Their first commercial fashion endeavour has had a resoundingly positive response from heavy-weight luxury buyers in the industry and their design partnership looks to have a sustainable future.



Conclusion:

Individually, Shenez Engineer, Ana Diaz, Carla Binotto and Carla Van Lunn all present diverse examples of innovative 21st century fashion design practice. Collectively, despite their different approaches and outcomes, it is significant that all four emerging designers are contributing to Australian fashion through small, 'entrepreneurial' businesses with a global outlook (McMahon 2011). The other contribution that they are clearly making is through valuing, highlighting and revelling in the process of design itself. This is notable because ironically, design as distinct from product development is a quality that is becoming alarmingly scarce in the global fashion market. The beautifully researched and meticulously made collections of these young designers all demonstrate an attention to detail and sensitivity to fabrication that flies in the face of fast fashion. In an industry characterized by imitation and diffusion, where research and development is still largely seen as a "luxury" too expensive to foster, these designers are staking their reputations on their capacity to stop, reflect and innovate. Their optimistic creativity is re-modeling the industry and pointing a clear path through the 21st century fashion blur.

Frock Paper Scissors Magazine Website:

<http://frockpaperscissors.com/>

the stitchery collective:

<http://thestitcherycollective.org.au/>

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